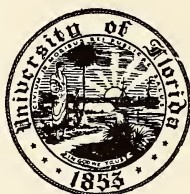


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WAKING IN A TREE



WAKING IN A TREE

POEMS BY *Daniel Hughes*

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To Teresa Foley



Waking in a Tree



Waking in a Tree

To wake standing, but at ease, the neck drawn up
Not as to a yoke, but held in space
More definite than one had dreamed, the arms

Cruciform but painless, veins thudding barky branch
To gesture of surrender, no leap
Out of a nighttime's sloth, but a balancing,
A sign of passage, pale markers at a road;

And to feel legs at last shoot down through earth,
Plummet-lines sounding loam, to their center
Weightlessly dropping, deeper than the ground,
A place to stand in; and to feel the whole torso

Brought against barrier that gentles it,
Chest medalled to wood, heart glad of its double cage,
Free in confinement, heart-shielded to sun;

And to feel ears loud as acorns, listen only
For drop of sap, the creak of blood and sap,
Hear only the glad heart hidden there,
Until all sound becomes an ear to listen;
And then, only then, to feel eyes try the world,
Like curtains closing on a sudden room.

What a mirror then! As though past image
The fiber of an eye beyond all looking
Grew taut with an old complexity
But the looking held its single object true . . .

To wake in that tree, in the winter of that tree,
Is but a waiting, the senses waiting,
Nothing of the senses that is not waiting,
Even the mind waiting to leaf, to lose, to look upon
The rigors of such a wilful paradise.

In Klee's Gardens

How the edge of a wing can sting!
It places my bare feet on gentle squares,
The clean cool feet of a child just scrubbed by mother;
It sets me down alone in my favorite room.

I've been here before, before the fist on glass,
The clocks, the shadows, those demands to stand in place
Like a fork on the left, like a spoon on the right.
I can hide from them here; I take off my face

And enter. How fragile are the flowers!
How heartlessly they delight to be seen!
Because I know enough to know these colors can come tumbling
down,
I sit on the border and think of green.

There is the gate of the deserted garden,
There are the yellow vines waiting for my hands.
But my feet are dirty again and mother is coming.
I wish I had never seen such hurtful lands.

Castrato to Audience

I am ungardened, emptied of all thought.
Tall as a giraffe, hairless as a hanging pig,
I stand shucked before you, bearing the price.
Knock-kneed, loose, with belly protruding big
As a woman sick with small birth, will this suffice
The greed, the nagging joy your senses sought?
I can sway in your ears until the bones
Of your head outsoar origin and loss;
I can make you a music where the stars cross,
Warmer than all the planetary tones.

I love it. Standing in front of you I climb
And fall and wing: crescendo-decrescendo
And my lady bursts her bodice; the cardinal cries
Bravo! from his chair—in my steep glissando
Their precious toes curl like bashful eyes.
And once, when the king moped away his time,
His jesters and his whores grown dull as words,
The queen's cunning medicine to please,
I hid in his bedroom and made him seize
The reins of state with a capon's chords . . .

Dear father, master of all the arts, when
You brought me to the hot needle and the thumbs
That burned music in my thighs, I hated you.
But see where the sickly, mewling trumpet comes
For challenge. Let the fat burgher blow and blow,
My throat denies him! . . . Ladies and gentlemen
I shall now melt the air! Maestro, attendez!
With fugato sweet and cantilena chaste
I fix your eyes on heaven . . . Below the waist,
The bats grind darkness, the snakes spit up their prey.

Song from a Dance of Death : Idiot

Freed from the stain of their conscious choices,
I grew into the maculate, foreign world.
Where else might I crawl where no green voices
Woke in the shrubs a brotherly, close tongue,
Or where else might I flee, or whom walk among
When I saw the lion and unicorn curled?

In my husk of flesh I walked the city
Where the leaves trembled and the secret God
Cast on autumn the colors of his pity.
But they found me by the barricades
And brought me from hunger into the shades
Of the king's great court to be his precious ward.

Monato the monkey understood me,
And the sparrowhawk called from his fiery cage
To unloose the chains of his ecstasy.
But I was wrapped in an antic mask
And pushed into the hall that I might task
The patience of the eunuch—or his rage.

My innocence gleamed like a single sun
And giggles broke like thistles on my fear.
My vision was their laughter, and I spun
Upon my toes to give them the delight
That dulls the savage corners of the light,
Until the lion sprang and I came here.

And came into this dark lucidity
Where I am man and bone and captive dancer.
The unicorn is not so white, so true,
As the dawnless, pure gestures you make
Within the landscape of my will.
O Dancer, rattle their bones on the black hill.

From Leonardo's Notebooks

That man is a type of the world.

So be it. Adonis hunting for a wound
Found the darling boar perfect in pursuit,
All his longing gathered there, yet longing still,
As now the mind turns from the snout of the world
To groin itself upstairs from pain, cornucopia
Of each return that is something less than sleep.

Amphibian, lucid, moorless, I mount the stair,
Through the hot hall where the postman's bloody feet
Like echoes rot the banister and the washerwoman
At her thick-kneed rites sits on the mail.
Is this hall the world? In Leonardo's sight,
Sick with longing for its primal tree?
Do the stairs feel symbols tack them tighter?
As I climb, source-full to the sourceless end,
The kitchen smiles above me, and the door swings back.

It is logical in open air to feel things one.
Fume, flash, vein of leaf or star,
All are falling hugger-mugger to beginning, or tilt
Their forces forward to the unharvest of all form.
But in this cage where light mistakes a cranny for a cry,
What need we remember? This house surrounds the self
Like clothes distracting simple sex to fantasy.

A roast chars itself behind the door,
Cunning, quiescent, delirious to be done,
A type of the world, but the world no type of me.
At the end of motion: home: dishes that are names.
I enter, I come to chairs shaped like tomorrow,
A dream of the world, but the world no dream of me.
Then the goat-grin of the mirror hangs me on its hip.
I think of sick Adonis with the face of a boar,
Gnomic, but mine own.

Allegory of Prudence

I WOLF

To the left which is backward and down a dim way
I sent him sniffing to startle
That man coming forward, arms like batons,
Legs like bloody drumsticks pounding silent earth,
Who slips on dwindling grass when he sees my wolf sail,
And, too late, turns back, while his soul rips under him.

How fine that now your words cannot wound me,
That guilt like overdone toast pops free at last!
In the dim corridor the busy wolf
Kneads down the doughy past.

Dear Tooth, trot below my hand till I need you.

II LION

Trainers with their heads in assorted maws
Learn to live with the bad breath of the present
As, parting the vines, dragging their sores,
They lead a lion where they may steal his cloak.

Today I rose like a tawny joke, and all
Who met me felt the feral stir of the jungle.
Chomp the grounds in the cup! Slog through the wet leaves!
Stalk down the ringing pavements!

Today I am huge and horrible
And will not be tickled into love.

III DOG

To the right, blinking cautiously out,
Nostradamus, the dog, bleats for biscuits.
His whimper's a siren that no one heeds;
He's modest, collared, and wears neat tweeds.

En avant! Dragging the twin sleds of Wish and Would,
He mimics Valley Forge's civic feet.
I do not like him; I'd beat him if I could.

Yet Dog, go ahead, seek the future's hopeful host,
Dog at the end of your rope, oracling a post.

Kokoro

to Beongcheon Yu

I step in the savage orders of the noon,
The loungers in front of hedges, the sneers
On cigarettes, and all the wistful years
We planned on come upon too soon.
Now weakness drones like trucks pulling over hills,
Winks at the corners its irresolute yellow,
Pushing me from island to island, shallow
With memory, kept by all the keepers' tills.
For what is absence? At the heart of things
A hieratic poem forever mute
Like those translations whose impatient root
We never got quite right. Yet something brings
Me semblance in the traffic of the self's complaint.
A sudden street we knew; your smile: the passion of restraint.

The Last Act

The last act is always bloody.—PASCAL

The last act always bloody, yes,
But no stage need set the arras round
Where victor and victim lie
Deceived confusedly: Macduff
Tangled with his villain on the ground,
Or softer, Puccini's climactic cough
Gentling the footlights with a sob.
Take this man of sixty who sleeps long,
Wondering who they are who rob
Him every evening of the past—
Whenever eye sinks down, they're at the sill
To jimmy loose his will;
And, entering, arrange a scene to last.

Expectations for his son become
A backward quilting for his loss;
For the rest, self-sorrowed to an ash,
He ponders the promised childhood cross,
But finds that promise rash.
And, dropping off, knows the play
Is gathering its ingenious force,
The signs fulfilling form by
Echoing the play's deep source:
Creaking stair, bent messenger's return,
Too late the ravelling to learn—
Who speaks the curtain-line through him,
The last act a bloodbath, all labor dim.

Noon Movie

Outside: that cripple once again denied
Who at lunchtime coffers best his usual trade;
Inside: just past observation that has spied
Him once too often seeking cheaper shade
Than night's show can give, he steps within a wish,
Counting how many others there must be:
Six kids, three lady-shoppers, and a fish
Turned drunken man, flopped beside his private sea,
While the fading newsreel forever trails
A vision of a nothing dress, a cerecloth
For dead models. First, a picture about whales—
How mechanical the *Pequod* now, for both
Captain and crew stay a mortar's length
Away from blood—surely that man's more bravely calm
Who, in the long whale of his own strength,
Rests at noontide, free from the sun's great harm;
And dives deeper, the Jonah of his will,
When the feature spreads the brain with badlands,
And the hero appears astride the hill
Overlooking town, then rides down, his hands
Steady on reins, sweated with the questing miles.
For here, at long last, is art's promised quiet,
Although the kids run up and down the aisles,
As though to tempt him to their riot;
Still, the silence of the hero's mind becomes his mind
As the world spins lovely formula to win
Him to assent. The denouement they find
Just when the story flattens to some thin
Question of romance perfects the waiting form;
Yet while the chase begins his soul unwinds to fear,
Knowing that though this ghost has kept him warm,
Two o'clock and all his life are near . . .

What could a final clinch teach him of despair?
There: the sudden, shocking street to cross,
The cripple, the towering afternoon.
He checked the bill, vowing to come back soon.

Thirty

And how does a life unfold, put forth its flower
In a dirty time? Are you Sinbad, groundless,
Free-floating, who at any hour
May start a fifth or hundredth voyage to the west?

O the Fates are fed up with expectation.
Their hands are rigid spindles now,
And were, even when you dreamed of deep-sea divers
Or skiers tracing gold across an Arctic snow.

We talked all night, lashing rafts with our hands,
You to New Zealand to try a pastoral flute,
And I, soggy on shore, waving parchment,
Calling mind, mind! But mind's a rotting fruit.

Coffee could not console, with its dawn
Of crippled diplomats stockpiling fears.
And I thought of how Eckermann saw Goethe dead:
The self-won lucid limbs of eighty years.

Not Yet

As a poet, dozing among his meters,
In a cheating adagio of his dream,
Finds frame and dusty sill on which to lean
His schizophrenic elbows, so I stare
Into the street, hearing with Emily
The street come running, from everywhere
Put on the swiftness of its tyrant air,
Come running, find the magical country,
The lucid pavement, the summer pool
Where the white swimmers stretch their limbs to loll . . .

No, it is winter and the cerecloth street
Stiffens in the dull procession of the snow.
We know it as we know our muffled hearts,
Abstraction, accident under our feet
Unseasonally, bearing our prints like holes
To Cathay, to corridors under dreams.
Awake, I stare into the street for themes
And find a car with chains, two women, and the trees.
Did Tolstoy's heroine, laughing in the snow,
Sharp stars, pink cheeks, come to his mind like these?

I doubt it. Playing it safe, I must watch
My image fill the glass with its familiar good
And, indulgent painter, make my content
Form; with the myth, the story, the frozen god
Keep the street where it belongs, delight the mind,
Hang in the delicate museums of despair . . .
You find in this an egotistic flaw?
Self-portrait, the painter's rare advantage—
A shame that Narcissus never learned to draw
But mumbled like a poet, undersea.

How, then, will I meet you? In what embrace?

Be not over-kind, but middling-gentle, wear a face
Not mine, give me back more than I can give.
We meet at the window. I feel our fears
Frost at the world's edge, on the world's coldest glass.
Not yet, not yet, can I reach your answers,
Faces in mufflers, muffled shadows racing
Down my glass until the glass with nature's tears
Goes blind, and I hear, on the walks of the town,
The laden avalanche of loss come down.

Lord Chandos to His Wife

*The speaker, taken from Hofmannsthal's story,
is a young Renaissance nobleman,
to whom all forms in which experience is normally
ordered have become absurd.*

*He is speaking to his wife,
as they both face outward through a
window looking onto a garden.*

Murdered me; why I have no thoughts at all.
Run your hands along my temples where something
Beats like a sea with no land, or a cry
Timbreless, unhouselled of any throat.
For dry, dry that full April tongue will call
And only the treacherous, magian spring
Striding through the ferns with potent thigh
Will hear, subtle with ear of ram and stoat.
What did you expect to find in this head?
Some center, some knowledgeable grace,
The hierarchy of custom's sweetness?
These are sick and, murdering, have murdered me.
When you turn, sun-veiled, sun-given, to my face,
I know nothing of you except that nothingness
I dote on. From our chaining flesh we are free,
With all names put by, all duties dead.

You misunderstand. We are not free for love,
But for being, as when, in year's last spring,
The well suddenly lipped its emptiness
And the beetle at its rim called me there.
Within the miracle of the changing air,
That gossamer, black body grew a thing
Palpable, lurched upon the world's fullness
To come upon my speech like dust, to move
In me the dominion of his dying.
Then all thresholds seemed to take April
Within the tidy dungeons of my brain.
And lust, grown cold in familiar flame,

Returned in the loose unfolding of the rain,
Not for possession by the brutal will
And not for use—only as the incautious sighing
Of the grasses that would green my human name.

Often, I had thought of waking thus: with birds
Somewhere in a stumbling aviary,
My head new, my tongue fresh beyond flaw.
I would sob my bird-grief and shake my beak
And one, touching my temples, would hear words
Not better made by the rook and jackdaw.
And this had come. (Stay with me . . . I speak
Only of that dream in which we always die.)
Consider the great world on such a day:
The furred horizon and the antlered west
Worked in me their poise, and the wind's plumage spoke
A light more tenuous than departure.
Starting from that dream, on a seamless quest,
I sought your certitudes. But the day
Betrayed me, and love's sweet alembic broke
In the season's fist and bled with its scar.

So I left the bright syntax of my youth.
When that was done, what could I seek but things?
Of roundness, of tensions, of currents claimed
By this new earth, adamant and unseen?
This was the logic that the bone retained,
And more: the high, deep-patterned grass, the sheen
On the blackest roach, the light on the wings
Of hawks as they moved, whose silver flared its truth
Above the groan of summer: then globes grown too large,
Corollas unfolding and, within, the lip
Torn by the kiss of the sun leaning
To the geometric shudder of the buds!

Between the pollen and the pall of time, what targe
Of speech could fight those warming floods?
I saw the full rose break flame at its tip
Through all the months of the earth's hot dreaming.

Then autumn leap, the dancer whose red art
Attempted every posture, every ruin
Without discord. In motley air the sound
Of her passing shook leaves upon my eyes
And held from profanation the ground
Of this seeing. Where, if not in the heart,
Did the chestnuts thud their grief and bark stiffen
Against October's amniotic cries
When we came into our classic dying?
Walking in snow, I saw the intricacy
Of loss, the Daedalean labors kept
By winter's craftsmen. Silent, unattended,
My mind grew shapeless as the field lying
Below our sills: gusty, pure, from which a sigh
Blew off, as though the handleless Parcae wept
To see their fabric mended . . .

What restless, plenary sea then sought me?
Windows pitched; I heard terraces buckle
In the assaults, the great chordal fires
Of March winds. And, in my pedant's room,
Crevices like dreams opened craftily,
Pages turned to grass and the sharp tickle
Of new death rose upon my palm's desire.
I heard in churchyards dusted by the moon
The dicing laugh of dead philosophers,
While below the pastoral, foolish lawns
The seeds of this labyrinth tried to sing.
Laughing, I made sly apothegms of dirt

And with a dying rhetorician's lures
Held only a captive worm . . . The long hurt
Of the year's body then turned beyond all horns.
I stood on summit earth in man's first spring.

These words fall like fading motes upon your flesh
And are changed before I speak again. Driven
To words, driven beyond them, I cannot yield
What you would wrest from me and bearing, bear.
Leaning, I cup your breast and the mesh
Of your hair undone is the cleft of air
Through which I fall. O thief, O trampled field,
Making and remaking what was given
Only once, where are the selving shadows
We once cherished, each to each other and alone?
If we love, let it be as wraiths that move
Silently along that crystalline wall
Where twilight takes the sill and turns the bone
To coral like our west. What god knows
Our inner names? What gestures may yet prove
We are more than parchments claim or call? . . .

At year's end, this loosening and this sleep.
Language is the ultimate adultery,
Farthest from the flawed antennae dancing
In the hurricane of sense. You see this cup?
It is a perilous transparency,
Nothing I have known, brilliancy dancing
The end, the loosening, the sleep
That are burning my tinder language up.
Hard flesh fruit and the bark of waking trees
Anneal me . . . there can be no more names.
A garden grows in me, its brimming well
Ringing in my brain, ringing me its lip and home.

Let me stand. The sun busies in my skull,
Stitching its truth within the April flames,
And, taut from Primavera's palms, the lucid bees
Affirm I am Her fragment and Her foam.

Those Two

I EVE TO SATAN

Ah, I've learned: the shining fold, the summer,
Yourself like a fan astride a seamless pool,
My lover, my chance—they were all illusions.
I cherish them for that and forgive you,
But wish you had not withheld what you must have known:
Our timid tongues bruising the fruit's surface
Could only fling our pieces upon an unleaving bush.
Did you keep the core? Does it hang like a trophy
In some crevice of Hell, visited by the lonely?
For we should have gnawed that apple to its root
And the root itself, though raging in the throat,
Should have become our sense, all the way down.

Am I right? That apple swallowed whole,
The garden challenged, not a stem remaining,
All within ourselves, bitten as a lover bites
That his lips recall the utter taste of time?

II SATAN TO EVE

Vous avez raison. But your tone is wrong,
Nearly petulant, as though you spoke with your mouth full.
Swallow, girl, swallow!
Oh, I'm sorry: old ironies invite fresh mockeries.
But I, too, am disbarred from jolly Eden.
For when you ate an axe sprang from the sun
And split my snake to sorrow. The garden waits there,
Dusty, unvisited, no living thing about,
Though sometimes from my perch outside I see stirrings,
Motes of a feeble light seeking a mirror,
Bones of a hand fumbling for the glove of flesh.
No . . . the core remains, rotting upon the bush
Where you threw it; the ants are lugging it away,
Piecemeal, undiscoverable, like us, deceived.

Dear Eve, had you swallowed heaven with a gulp,
Even now, we would be dancing on the greensward,
Our bodies attune to any bird that flies,
And I, like a knight come forth to his first adventure,
Would kneel to kiss your hand before the dazzling tourney.

Rimbaud 1891

The nuns move within the wound, in the room
Where savannahs of frost and no renewal
Ply his tongue with gardens of farewell.
And his head, rich with silence, a tomb
Of words, mimics their crowsoft, gentle cries
And receives the blessing of their eyes.

And hands, that other nun's, prim amanuensis,
Trap him in the sheets like a fish,
Bestow on each raving ancient wish
That hook of years, a sister's kiss—
And pluck, blind, peel him to the shore
Until the god is eaten as before.

November come in the confined leaf
And the peasant dying. He sees the chateaux,
The ruined seasons fail and flow
Within the laggard harvest of his grief.
O wound restless with passage, with wing—
“Isabelle! The hung magical Christus is king.”

The nuns move within the room; it is safe.
Bend the bourgeois home. Through a consecrated sheet
May the prodigal and mother meet.
The girl dazzles, “*chère maman*, he is safe.”
And the keel fends the astonished sea,
And the million birds break journey.

Hokusai

One day he awoke
To find the sky a different blue;
The old man, all thumbs
At that original, the true.

How casually it came!
One sky, one drifting cloud, a tree
Limned from the fusty world.
He trembled; he was seventy-three.

Yet there was time for mending,
Time to rework the slavish errors
Of a lifetime's art, time to break through
All those laborious mirrors.

Unmetaphored and whole,
He would stare into the ruined west,
Until, tutored by its wound,
All his sight became a palimpsest.

Then cuckoo and heron grew
From their once faltering air
To gesture upon his page
Larger than the sense could bear.

And each thing he saw:
Inchworm, seed, dancer, or clown,
Flung into his fingers
Rhythms that became his own.

Yet something still escaped.
This was only the first of his art.
His youth was to blame.
O learn patience, ambitious heart!

He cursed and prayed and drew.
At eighty, he would find the key.
At ninety, the life of things
Would sing in him like the Inland Sea.

At one hundred, he thought,
I may learn how to draw. Then he wept
To see his hands shake and throat cough.
He knew this truth had slept,

And would sleep again. Fury
Danced as the heron went flying.
On his brush, an old man's world,
Peacocked, sentient, dying.

Geisha in Moonlight

Unsolar, calm by water,
Still to you, daughter,
Let the moon reveal
 What your hands feel

And temper to the sea
Your quick virginity,
Restless in cloth of gold
 Though not yet bold.

For a fan may grasp all space
To painted, simple grace;
A samisen's harsh tune
 May mime the moon;

A woman at time's rim
Is porcelain, gay hymn
In essence unpossessed,
 Though richly dressed.

Yet where your body sways
Brave Heraclitus weighs
The gain and gathered loss
 And sees you tossed

In the wrack of a flow
Your flowers cannot know,
Whose fury swells the tide
 To gain your side.

O dancer in the mist,
Where the Kami has kissed
His lips upon the shore,
 In dark metaphor

I see mirror and coin,
Geisha and landscape join,
Assume the perfect theme,
 But stay in dream.

Sebastian in Heaven

Sleep without dreams in the bright deaths of autumn.
The white thief is here, stealing sense from the trees,
Looping emptiness onto emptiness.
For whatever is touched here, fingers fumble into air,
Whatever is tasted crumbles on the tongue,
Whatever is held too longingly leans
Into the vague, supernal shadows.
He sees it as a mountain allegorically upward,
Scentless bushes hanging color by the roadside
Where few tillers have cared for so stern a soil.
And the body answers like a swimmer
Gone out beyond all vision and all voice,
The body forlorn in its shallow lake,
Answers his whispered prayer to drown, to drown.

He remembers how his eyes turned over when he died,
The sight diving within, shedding the textures,
The busy malformations of the light;
How, as from an inverted chalice, his blood had run free
To find the corridors of another life.
Another life! No rot and riot of beginning
Where division in the cell, the mother-tug,
Gagged him on the juices of a mortal sun,
Where his eyes, below a midwife's thumb,
Glazed themselves in the sickly fires of the seen;
Where he grew, puppet to all his acts:
Acrobat, climbing the citadel of the world,
Student, anxious for laurel and lyre,
Lover, lost in the unfinished landscapes
Of desire, weary of the emblem
Bitten in his neck like mock communion . . .
Another life!—a covenant, a choice,
When, captain among the cohorts, hearing the sudden word,
Among the files and tocsins, among the stones,

Hearing the cry, faith like an explosion,
He saw his Emperor's deaths-head burgeon in the rain
And his city drown below a singing star . . .

This is the mountain as foretold, vertical,
Lonely, only weeds hung out now, and the clouds low.
Then cones not cones, pale chestnuts, the approaches
Always higher, and the bundle of his wounds
Starting to come loose, making him crimson
As a tree among trees, his leaves seeking only
The proper earth for ruin. Where will it end?
He stops to rest, but the dust chokes him onward.
Was it enough? The entered flag, the white sun
Blazing in his breast: Come, steel, come, honest waking,
Pierce! the breach of time shut in the body's evil,
Pierce! that nipple, bone, and lung may burn
Away beginning! Pierce! the promise cresting
On this red shore! Pierce! gay archers of the Lord! . . .

He stumbles against a tree, but his hands
Find only powder, ash, the resistless bark
That spurns and spurs his grief. Was it enough
That all the arrows came like benediction,
Naming with accurate tongue their burning love?
For going upward, dragging the bundle of his wounds,
He feels his flesh rebel, as though that mask
Would never have done with being. And now
The ground beneath him falls away from sense,
Only himself, heavy in a weightless world,
Climbing toward rock, can know and taste and be.
For all things fade in their indifferent dance
Like buds withdrawn into their primal cells.
What can the ear make of sound withdrawn
Past possibility, silence not made of sound?

What can the eye shape from shapelessness
But a hunchbacked wind raging in the darkness?
What can the mouth savor of the fruit but a foam
Of guilt, the costly martyrdom of joy?

Almost then without knowing, without will,
Not yet in despair or flight, he places hands
On the frail steel wires that can still connect,
And there in the shadowless road, pulls self from self,
Waking in his wounds sense like a flaming star,
And turns to the downward path, to the bloody plain of time . . .

O empty the heavens and the coffered entrances,
Empty the bright falconry of the distant sky,
Empty all but the path he walks down again
Where the honeyed earth, the late crumbs of beginning,
mark his prayer:

“Dear Christ, dear blessed Christ
Of the languid promises
And those thorny eyes
That whispered through Golgotha’s mist

Despair to be dying young,
All grief must glean its vision
From a grieving tongue
As out of earth earth gains her sun.

Profane us, harvest our wounds
Like fruits of the morning.
We are haunted by a thing
Mortal as man . . . With these words

Alone can we bless the birds
That leap from earth's immortal fountain.
For though the gods may someday ground their swords,
We live not on their mountain."

His eyes open: dazzling there, the first world, the second death.

Relic

How perfect was the skeleton of that child,
Intact, sufficient, coiled upon itself,
Uncovered by the machines of circumstance,
In the untended part of our homeward yard.

As though we bent to some sly excavation,
Careful as the quills of scholars
Or the forceps of a surgeon out for fame,
We stretched the tentative fingers of first love

To lift it from the wound where it lay
And brought it, shining, into the sun,
The dusty links flashing like hooks of old jewels.
"Bone," I said, brushing away the hutch of dirt,

"Bone is faithful to the earth it rests in.
Look, how all terror come, the child fell here
In some sand fortress beside a wishful sea
To sleep away the winter of its changes.

And then the inessential flesh lapsed to loam,
The young bone held, the sap grew still, surrendered."
"Then what is left," you answered, "must be real,
Even there, where the sex was, the ultimate spaces."

But when we stood it up to get a total view,
The weak connections failed; discordantly,
Like an unstrung harp, it fell about the field.
We had no skill to restore those bones again.

Workaday

“Real life is elsewhere,” he read, and thought it true,
Until she touched the springs in him, and
Let him find that elsewhere, let him find it new
In her hand not his hand, in her sudden mouth
That proved a world might still be possible,
And, all exits shut, at last he’d come to love,
His way blocked with the cords of her giving,
His path dumb in the silences of her hair—
At last he would be glad that he was two.

But what can love bear? The floor was cold,
The pendulum kept sticking at the dawn.
He put on seven selves, all unbuttoned still;
He slogged to the likeliest mirror and dove through.
How the mailbox attempted to dissuade,
The traffic light appall, the headline show
He wasn’t there at all. And wasn’t.
His hands felt the air, his knees pumping high
Brought out ten thousand more; they jerked to the subway.

Death was simple, bumping with those others,
Whose strapped hands hung like chitlings white with dust,
Whose eyes, long-gathered by a passing dog,
Could not tell if real life were anywhere,
Had any need to be. Yet held his secret:
When he bit her lip goodbye, he kept her coin of blood,
And one strand of her hair still ticked his nose.
He carried them like wedding meats all day,
Then ran home—O elsewhere!—to the life he chose.

More Games

*Your spring and your day are wasted in play
And your winter and night in disguise.—BLAKE*

I've hid; so take your hands away now.
You'll see the night has come
And whether spun once or twenty times
You'll find the park grown glum

As unsold apples, and the chill up your legs
Urging you to drop the game.
But, suddenly, puffed from dark, there!
Ignis fatuus, the old deceiving flame,

Flashes from behind a nearby tree
And off you go to whirl
Around bushes that reveal—nothing again;
You're alone, and a little girl.

But even if someone *had* been there,
Had gnashed his teeth, joking, to be found,
Where is the first tree your wish should touch?
Total night has shifted all the ground.

I'm coming now; you watch me as you sway,
Leaning toward flight, a bit lost,
Your cry uncertain: "all-y, all-y, in-free,
I see him, he's dressed like a ghost!"

I suppose it's me you see, as I see you,
Pointing a finger, waving a hand.
Run, darling: touch the tree and call us home,
Where we pretend to see how we stand.

A Map to Your House

I shan't read it; no, I much prefer
Watching you sketch it large, sitting on our couch,
Making clear what I had hoped would stay dense,
The roads, the parkways to your innocence.

I hate maps; they demean the possible,
And grant but a handful of approaches.
This is too direct a way to meet your past;
Whatever I find will be full of reproaches.

Verweile doch, said Faust, and set a theme
By which lovers, poets, drinkers dream.
But maps don't expect their contours to remain,
They'll shift their borders to suit a new terrain.

The map is done and neater than we needed.
X marks the final spot: *your* ground, *your* air.
How tiresome that reassembling, those objects
Now imagined, then withdrawn. I shan't go there.

Lines for Mary

Blank sky without, blank thoughts within.
I rummaged in old cartons for a sign
And found your first books with markings dim
In borders where your passions had been.
Lines of life brought the people bold
Before me: Heathcliff at his window,
Miriam in her aching gardens cold
With unlove, and next to some letters, below
A Shakespeare, sunk deeper than all these,
I found your Bible like loam below the leaves.

From childhood's myth of solid size,
Your maiden name flecked gold against my thumb;
An elegant book, given as a prize,
It weighed in my hands like kingdom come.
I looked for passages you might have marked,
The likeliest to be like your soul:
A beauty and a fear at once, shocked
Into awareness's blazing coal,
But found so many, I wearied of the sight,
Those recaptured runes of a ruined light.

Yet still the text eluded me, the place
Where past and present might fade
In one, until the Apostle crayoned: "My grace
Is sufficient for thee; for my strength is made
Perfect in weakness." Scholarship done,
I closed the book and saw your prayer
In its garden unshade the ancient sun,
And my fierce girl put on the weeds of care.
Darling, in that attic, I put back your loss
And in love and trembling made our single gloss.

The Quarrel

I

Then the weapons are suddenly there, glittering
In the twilight, the armory of self ransacked,
The words cocked, the gestures honed to hurting,
Until each bead of vanity has cracked.

Now they close, duellists in the death of love,
And find, from long honesties, the choicest flesh.
Why, with such knowledge, should the other live?
Better to drop the enemy with a wish.

Death comes quicker than either wanted it,
The murderers stare at the severed heads.
Destruction, faster than either wanted it,
Leaves them nothing to do but find their separate beds.

II

So he dreams: cockade, plume, silver bridle,
Palazzo and fountain, a hero from Stendhal,
All his virtues large, his errors boyish,
Save the illiberal and the stupid, loved by all.

So she dreams: passion made flawless as crystal,
Body a Renoir tint and soul a culpable fall.
No hours enter that are not intense—
Save the sexless and the careful, she is loved by all.

In such likeness of desire they cannot feel
How the crossing of a dream can kill.

III

One moment in that complacent dawn they lay,
Self-perfected, the corrigible nightmare
Teasing the skull to laugh if grown too terrible.

But then the sharp edge of the sun uprose,
Through the summer-tall blinds came beautiful
From its rest on slate, stamped on sheet and cupboard,
Spun in the room like a unicorn caught
In their quarrel's thicket. Divided, unstrung,
With the curtains roaring, their faces worked from sleep
And gulped on the small visions of the night.
Cold hand in cold hand lay, seeking summer,
And pleas in the palms of renewal spoke.
As children might mint the first morning,
On the sills of the world, unalone, they woke.

Jealousy

To play the game, he sends the buzzer squawking
Three flights up to collapse unhonored on the sill,
And, key ready anyhow, unlocks her absence,
Every step of the stair confirming what will—

Power he'll need, for how many hours—three?—
One of which he spends in the sheer technique
Of return: unhookings, washings, glimpses
At mail, arrangements of tomorrow; it's bleak,

Of course, but he's filling time; he exists.
It's only when clothes are hung, shoes are back in trees,
Three books with places marked are marked too soon,
That all this order brings him to his knees,

And he knows she's with him, whether by chance meeting
At some grey intersection of his fear,
Or by plan worthy of a General Staff,
She's with him, and that's why she can't be here.

Too early to call her suspect friend,
That wife no better than a surface smile can show,
In mid-afternoon, horn-headed once again,
He can only plot the places they might go.

That takes some time, working with half his mind,
And ten minutes of television's treat
Serves to keep that old chimera still behind.
But that man with furrowed brow and shaking wrist

Has just hired a hulk to trail his wife—
How painful, and no help. Nothing will help
Except to wish the hands around the clock,
Telephone her friend, suppress his bleating yelp.

Just then she buzzes twice, in time to save him,
In time to slam the phone with honor on the hook,
But his head wobbles off his neck in answer,
Tumbling down the stairs like the bag she's dropped in shock.

Dialogue in Lieu of Anything Else

“You smell of sour milk when you’ve been home,
As though, once within that fusty door,
You started tasting all the rancid shame
You thought you left behind so long before.
What do they do there? Lead you to a trough
Of all the guilt nostalgic breakfasts can bestow?
With every cunning kiss remind us both
You’ve never broken free that chain below?
Don’t kiss me. I taste the town, the people,
Those faces you wear upon your eyes:
Your desire is a dodge, your touch is feeble,
There’s nothing in your mouth that can surprise.
Forgive me, but I can’t pretend tonight
I’ve helped to free you from your manhood’s blight.”

“My taste tastes me and changes with the scene.
Should I wear a mouth-mask to keep out such germs?
Standing on the square, I watched, as in a dream,
The failing lives that live on failing terms,
And could not recognize one hand that might extend
Reunion like a mockery of joys.
The past *is* on my lips tonight; there’s no end
To its kiss and what that kiss destroys.
Yet my luggage is put up and travel’s dust
Washed almost clean. It takes some time to pare
A hopeless heritage away, and even lust
Must sometimes end in the ditch of old despair.
A smell of sour milk, both literal and not,
Should remind you where I’ve been, not where I’ve got.”

On the Plain

We lie upon the level earth
And space like many mouths spreads in us.
O never close again! These gorges dazzle,
These cliffs astound to loveliness.
We do not fall like simple rock,
Sliding to death in dusty caverns;
Though we sink we seek no purling sea.
Our language stirs in the deepest vines
And walks us outward,
Answering the liturgy of the light.

I have no wholenesses;
Even these shades I cannot get quite firm:
Flash of deerfoot, beak, the tiger padding,
And, behind us, clumsy from the forest-floor,
The peacocks following, moulting to despair.
But I am weary of hill and pit,
Of upward visions curling in my head,
Of downward threats cracking the knees to bend.
Here in this clearing we came upon wonder
And found, in the grief of trampled herbs,
The honey of self heavy in the grass,
The wind one way only.

We must rise now. By nightfall
We shall be over the next hill, the next plain,
Even farther from the forest.
Let it dream on in its silences,
In its cool mazes, its shadowless dreads,
Its fruits too insistent in their favors,
Its streams too confident of source.
What did we know of each other there
But a blaze of being drying our lips from touch?
On this new earth the waters break like sudden Niles.

I know that spaces will knead us,
Death's flaming angel hunger to divide.
We shall wither in the hands of uncreated time.
But let your heart come whole, your limbs find echo
In the journeying sun. Look—
Resemblances, the good news of headlands,
And the green paths crying; invade us now!

Testings

I

My bone's a metronome teaching flesh its time.
Walking in a skin wracked with greasy leaves,
Headlines, candy wrappers, string from broken missals,
I collage a self as the stray winds please.

But break easily, staggering to a horn.
Why does the wristwatch sweat? the masonry intrude?
Red fox, green bee, headlong antelope,
Lean like judges from the wood?

Misplaced before mirrors in the hallway,
Among the lost sad caps of passage,
My father's father, wet from his vanished bog,
Knocked, entered, signalled, stripped off his hands
Like gloves, his feet like leggings—and I dressed,
Dressed to discover nametags everywhere,
In the hip-pocket a bulky world.
In his skin I skimmed a century,
Swooped from weeds, hung ghostly in the swamps,
Hand in bony hand tread down his track,
And threshed old graves to find some hair to cry in . . .

Come, clackety bone, clack me a self to lay on.
My body's a sailor's meat tattooed by a travelled thumb,
Moaning through hearts and flowers the old incisions:
Who am I? What am I? From what do I come?

I am beads heaped under carnival glass,
Longing for their crooked crane; I am dye
For the world's vestment—though all flesh is grass,
I learn to choose my pleasure and my pain.

II

For what he had hoped—elusive
Hands like tobacco leaves might be
When on spring bark the palms thrust alive
Find the ticks emerging sweetly
To prove that he could taste with hands
What no brain cell understands—
This had not come round. Yet saw him-
Self still in that old guise,
Experimenter on the brim
Of a reality, his eyes
Unbooked to the bark's pale zero,
Making himself the story's hero.
Then spoiled the deed that it was done
So meanly—that touching of the tree.
His shadow knew—and the sun,
Doubling his treachery.
Within the gold of heaven caught,
He touched the quick of tree with thought.

III INSTANCES

1

Between anklebone and heel precisely tasting sunlight,
The woman stirs in her sacrificial gladiator's smock,
Until, sure as snails, tongue ferrets out the moonlight,
And her knees wake in shock.

O milieu that itches hand to sketch but not to say!
Below the salt of words the buttery sun drenching beds,
The startled toes spreading like startled heads,
Lizards, chameleons opening up the day . . .

We bake here like brown summery things
Cast on a ground that cannot shrieve them,
Pinned to a tear that will not leave them,
And drown before the first bell rings.

2

Your noon bath lingers by my desk,
One scent on another whitely acrid,
For, nuzzling your passing shoulder, I took hold
Of your essence from armpit to scrubbed wrist.
Now, your door shut, your habits laid out to mask,
I taste that I exist.

3

To bite the shade behind her knee, the sun
Warming as she walks, or in the crook of elbow
To skim the teeth across as with a fruit
Long pondered in its cup than downed at once!

Such obsessions stir me on my walk,
But content with any tasty blade, I loll
Upon the concrete cracks and dusty blooms of June,
Savoring my lifetime's peck of dirt.

In summer there are no chestnuts shaped like memory,
No dodge of remember but a doge of touch,
When she stops, turns, presents her knees,
Breaks me in the crook of her bare arm . . .

IV

From the others on the table I lift the walnut,
Rocky, ribbed, livelier than stone,
And roll between my fingers its wizened bone.

Elephant's skin is like that, lined, but
Deeper in its mysteries, the great heart within.

I hold it up: the center membrane pinches my thumb,
Most easily split there, if hands were all,
And hands and wills were equal.
With the cracker, an elegant French thumbscrew,
I could crush its sides, watch the shell writhe back,
Mangled dry wounds fleshed to a punishing blue.

But, today, I shan't crack through to feeding,
But will count the sweet externals, the coy ridges,
Crevasses, wrinklins, pits, and bridges
My fingers seek as though they were not me.
And are not me, thank God.

I shut the walnut in my palm;
Not one of its hundred lines is like me.
I shut the walnut in its calm;
Not one of its walls weighs my tumbling urgency.

I am content.







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Waking in a tree; main
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